

The Senate Cools Off on the Missile Race

WASHINGTON — To the delight of the "non-nukes" and to the discomfiture of the "nukes," the seemingly one-sided Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty is turning into a two-edged sword that may at last cut into the thicket of nuclear disarmament.

The reforging started last week when the Administration went before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to seek belated approval of the eight-month-old treaty to prevent the spread of atomic weapons. The Administration wanted to talk about how the treaty would advance the cause of peace by preventing the non-nuclear states from acquiring atomic weapons. But the committee wanted to talk about whether the nuclear states under the treaty could continue to proliferate their own atomic weapons, such as by building ballistic missile defense systems. For all the hoopla about the treaty being the most important arms control agreement of the nuclear age, it was always interpreted by the United States as a somewhat one-sided proposition. As the disdainful French Government described it, "it is a treaty to disarm the unarmed."

The treaty might have been sold and approved by the Senate on that basis if it had not been for two developments — the outcry in Congress over the planned deployment by the United States of an antiballistic missile (A.B.M.) system and the belated discovery of little noticed Article VI in the treaty.

Article VI was stuck into the operative section of the treaty at the insistence of the non-nuclear states to establish some parity of obligations. Basically the article calls upon the nuclear powers to pursue "good faith" negotiations to curb their atomic arms race.

So far as the United States was concerned, the article seemed to be regarded as one

of those standard statements of hope put into all arms control agreements.

That Article VI should now become the focal point in Senate consideration of the nonproliferation treaty tells much about the disenchantment developing in Congress, and the Senate in particular, with the atomic arms race. When conservative Karl Mundt of South Dakota, who last year was instrumental in blocking ratification of the treaty, can take the position, as he did last week, that the treaty is meaningless unless it leads to arms control agreements between the nuclear powers, then obviously an important shift is taking place in Senate opinion.

What is happening in the Senate is that Article VI and the nonproliferation treaty in general is being seized upon as an argument against proceeding with deployment of the Sentinel A.B.M. system. The argument advanced by members of the Foreign Relations Committee is that it would be inconsistent for the United States to ratify the treaty and then proceed with deployment of a system which would have the effect of accelerating the atomic arms race.

Somewhat reluctantly, Secretary of State William P. Rogers conceded that the treaty would impose an obligation upon the United States to enter into strategic arms control talks with the Soviet Union — talks first proposed by the United States but now being promoted more by the Soviet Union. Pressed by the committee, Mr. Rogers also expressed the hope that the talks could begin before deployment was started on the Sentinel system.

But that was obviously not the hope or desire of Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird when he appeared two days later before the committee. Reciting all the steps that the Soviet Union was taking to accelerate the atomic arms race, Mr. Laird took

the position that from the standpoint of national security it would be a mistake to hold up deployment of the Sentinel system while the United States seeks some way to curb the race.

Come mid-March, the treaty should be approved by the Senate. And when it is, Senator J. W. Fulbright, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, argued this would represent "a clear expression of Senate opinion" that the United States should enter into arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union rather than deploy the A.B.M. system.

That undoubtedly represents

an over-statement of the significance of Senate approval of the treaty. But the treaty is providing an opportunity for the opposition to build up its case against the Sentinel system and to put the Administration on the defensive. It is no longer certain that the Administration can win Senate approval for Sentinel deployment. And even if it does, the Senate is pushing the Administration into talks to stop such deployment of new nuclear weapons — which is precisely what the non-nukes had in mind when they insisted upon Article VI.

—JOHN W. FINNEY